

Discourse on the Practice of Painting

and its Main Processes:

Underpainting, Overpainting and

Retouching

Jean-Baptiste Oudry

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Gentlemen,

Through the graciousness you showed upon hearing my lecture on the study of colorⁱ, I found within myself courage that I did not know I possessed. Yes, your praise of what I said on this topic and my motives for presenting them, has given me all the assurance I need to start again. Hence, I present to you today a second lesson for our young people.

The ideas that I'll be proposing today have been rolling around in my head for some time. I've also been thinking a while about which ways of painting might form techniques that one considers fine and successful. I had always hoped, however, that someone more capable than I would take all of this upon himself, turn it into a coherent discourse and show our students the shortest and most sound path to achieving this goal. Since no individual has stepped forward to address this topic, at least as far as I know, I consider the matter handed over to me. I accept this task all the more willingly, knowing that it is more within my means to do it than within anyone else's. I even thought I might create a stimulating lecture (since stimulating and interesting are one in the same). I had hoped to achieve this effect by showing our youth the specific benefits they might receive. Did I succeed? That's another question. You'll be the judge of that, gentlemen, for I don't dare flatter myself with an answer.

I'm well aware that one might object to this material on the grounds that it is very arbitrary and that, in fact, there are several approaches to painting that may lead to the same goal. I agree only partially because among these different approaches some surely have more merit than others. That's what this lecture is about. If those that I point out to you appear correct, then all of my expectations shall be fulfilled. Our young people will certainly reach their objective through the most reliable path. If you feel that I am in error, gentlemen, and you show me what is wrong, then our students will likewise benefit. I will consider myself happy for having shared this new level of instruction with them on account of the errors, which in your eyes, I made.

As for the rest, I hope you'll agree with my behavior toward the students gathered here, as they were on the occasion before, (and with my addressing them directly. I believe that this



effect will render the lecture more intimate and persuasive. At the very least, gentlemen, it will take away its pedantic air, a thing I entirely dread.

Thus once again, I address you young students of painting and, as they say, put the brush in your hands. You are children of the nation and our children. Every one of us would render this service with paternal kindness. You see proof of this every day. In addition, I can't help but repeat here things that your teachers have probably told you hundreds of times. I was thinking about this as I prepared this lecture, but eventually told myself, "Good principles, even if presented poorly, have the benefit of never boring students who are genuinely interested in learning."

Moreover, it's no small matter to present together these principles, something perhaps you've never heard before, accustomed as you are to considering them individually. Finally, as a sign of the sincere friendship I feel for you, I believe I should share with you the best of what my significant painting experience, ample research, and reflections have taught me on how to paint and also about which precautions to take to give our work a solid and lasting foundation of good color.

When I say "the best" you should understand that I make this judgment based on my own feelings or prejudice but do not stubbornly insist that it's true. I would be sorry to set such a dangerous example for you. My teacher, the late Mr. de Largillièreⁱⁱ used to say that stubbornness was a drunken state of vanity that starts by making a person deaf and blind and ends by killing off the most promising of talent. So you see how much you should be on your guard against such a pernicious fault!

Let us now examine the techniques in question and see what one must do to effectively underpaint, prepare objects according to their various types, overpaint, and finally, retouch in a tasteful manner. I shall also explain the technique for immediate painting. In each of these areas it's important to have solid ideas that are grounded in principles. Without these you won't become a good painter. Don't think that the many details that I'm going to present are minutiae. Teachers may consider these things beneath them, but nothing should appear small and irrelevant to a



beginner's developing eyes.

For example, when I talk about the attention you should give in choosing your canvas, you might think this point unimportant. But you're wrong. You should view everything that goes into properly conditioning your works as a serious matter. You should understand how the perfection of the canvas used contributes to that. We are especially negligent in this matter. The dealer who sells canvas is out to make money and the buyer is only looking to save money. The Flemish approach this matter in a curiously different way. All of their canvases are without glue. Consequently theirs are more supple than ours and not subject to flaking. In addition to this, before priming they run the canvas through a kind of calender that crushes the thick threads and knots, rendering it very uniform. Really, all we have to do is use canvas without glue. Still, there is one major flaw with this kind of canvas. It's caused by the sizing that is applied during the fabrication of the canvas. If you don't take care to remove the sizing by thoroughly washing the canvas (something one rarely thinks about doing) it begins seizing up once humidity from where the painting is placed has had time to saturate it from behind. This causes wrinkling in certain parts and produces an unpleasant and irreversible effect. Here is the first matter you should take into consideration. As you see, it is neither tiresome nor costly. Each of these things consists of you closely following the procedure and then becoming accustomed to seeing whether you have followed them exactly.

Priming the canvas requires another consideration. The shade selected for the primer is hardly an irrelevant matter. We've been in error for a long time on this point. Brown-red primers, the norm for so long, produce some very bad effects. Shadows painted over it almost always become hard to make out, as if they were the same color, and the most delicate halftones tend to fade into nothing.

The white primers used by some of our teachers have another flaw. After a certain amount of time the white tends to pierce through the shadows and halftones because these two areas are never done in as thick an impasto as the lighter areas. In addition, close-up the colors don't have the same consistency. I've seen paintings from first-rate painters where the shadows



were so undone that you could only bring them back through a complete repaint from end to end. (In doing this, however, you'd completely lose these precious pieces.)

I think that as a general rule we could say that any solid color, whether it be yellow ochre, *ocre de ru*,ⁱⁱⁱ brown-red, or other similar color, should be rejected as a primer color because it will intensify over time and begin to dominate everywhere. This is especially the case, as I have said, in the halftones and shadows, which are irreversibly absorbed. It's necessary to quickly eliminate any colors, which are by nature too grainy and sandy, for example, like *la mine*.^{iv} Such colors cause the paintings to crack in no time at all and make it impossible to roll up the canvas and almost impossible to handle it.

A good halftone primer made up of a soft and adaptable color is thus, in my opinion, the best there is. I believe we should strive for this. I'm going to speak to you about this in the context of a long series of experiments, verified and reverified many times. I've always been satisfied to see that with such primers the overall tone of my work was still holding as strong after ten years as after two.

So here you are, rewarded with a good glueless canvas, rinsed of its sizing and primed in a beautiful halftone color. You know what you want to put on it; you have done a sketch or idea that defines the forms in light and dark.^v Obviously a discussion on this is not within the scope of my topic, as it falls under the jurisdiction of composition. I hope that those of my illustrious colleagues who distinguish themselves so honorably in this area will, in turn, elucidate that specific subject for you. Finally, you begin sketching but first you have to load your palette. Are there any other observations I could share on this topic?

Indeed there are, but as points in my lecture they may seem somewhat paltry. Perhaps it would be better to turn it over to my illustrious peers. I believe so much in their kindness and goodwill that I'll chance it. They take everything concerning your instruction very seriously; nothing is trivial. I hope they will excuse me, knowing my good intentions, if I cause a few moments of boredom. So let's get to the point.

To load your palette correctly, you should start by filling it with all the colors that are in



use. I say all of them because they are all useful when used appropriately. Would I tell you that you should only thin your red lake,^{vi} yellow lake^{vii} and black colors with drying oil^{viii} and saturate your orpiment^{ix} with drying oil? Of course not. You know that and have always known that. Once you've put down all of your colors, from white to black, make five or six bright colors. As for the halftones, make as many as you can for they should not be worn out with the brush and they will never produce as much effect as when they are used in their purest state. As for the brown shades, make what you think you'll need, and verify that each of the colors is made with a knife and not the end of the brush. This is a flawed practice that will affect your work. Arrange your colors by gradation to better evaluate each shade and compare it to the shades of other colors. Make sure that not a drop of oil remains on your paintbrush or brush, and be sure that they are completely dried. Cleanliness is an essential part of this process and in all of your procedures. It will add freshness and longevity to your works. It will also convey an air of decency to you and your profession. The opposite quality would be extremely detrimental.

Let's get to the main point and examine individually what is involved in the three main processes contained within the practice of our art. We'll start with sketching in the underpainting.

It would appear that good practitioners are generally in agreement that the underpainting is not about the finesse of the brush stroke. Rather it's about properly establishing the chosen subject's form. One should situate the main masses as best as one can in the areas determined by the composition. You should do this in such a way that you won't have to put lights over browns or browns over lights. In short, you should create a good base to receive the colors and work that you'll be painting over it.

That being said, let's approach our work with this frame of mind. To create a good underpainting base, use colors that have body and cover well. Put down your colors firmly and equally in the right spots. Combine the colors proportionately with the brush, moving them in all directions as you follow the design and its contours inside and outside of the forms. This is what is involved for the human figure or flesh.

For draperies it's more or less the same technique. Underpaint them as flat and smooth or



trace the direction of the folds, and just follow the general outline or shape. Do this without adding any detail, especially strong brown strokes, because they have a damaging effect on the work especially when you return to paint the draperies after having compared them to the real ones.

Your preparation will be completely different when underpainting an animal. Here, you have to use a lot of color and essentially dash it onto the canvas. In other words, instead of using long, wide, uniform strokes as you do with the human figure, you should press your brush head-on onto the canvas. This creates a kind of effect that costs nothing and has the added advantage of doubling the finish when it is repainted. As you paint over a well-nourished preparation, one worked a little unequally, you will add thickness and considerable roundness to your work.

Landscapes demand more or less the same procedures. For terraces and trees you must repeat the work leaf by leaf until the work is complete. The skies are the only thing that must be prepared very uniformly. You should avoid loading them up with too much thickness because an overly rough preparation in this part would contradict the natural appearance of the sky, which always looks fine, light, and vaporous.

Flowers should also be underpainted uniformly because of their smoothness—one of their greatest beauties. There are some flowers, however, that you'll need to start building up in the underpainting—flowers like anemone, hollyhock and other similar flowers. It's up to the skilled painter to judge which areas need this kind of preparation. Leaves sometimes require a little of this, since it creates that grainy texture so often observed in nature.

To work successfully with metals, like gold and silver vases and other similar objects, you should give their form a solid preparation when you paint them. Afterward you need to go back over them with a lot of glaze to capture the polish and brilliance. A great variety of colors are required to represent the things that are reflected off the metal from a distance. It's no small task to undertake all this work and not end up with a vase that looks deformed or rough. This is part of one's skillful use of color that I have already spoken about and don't want to bring



up here. The glazes in question are applied to a dry surface—not a surface that had already been dry for some time, but one that has just recently become dry enough to be varnished. They will bond better with what is underneath and form a soft and solid work.

Before going any further, let me say a word on the proper use of color in underpainting, overpainting, or retouching. I believe we can establish a general rule that one should never use pure colors such as those we get at the paint seller. We always see that when they are used that way they turn and change immediately. Even white in its pure form starts turning yellow right away and continues to change over time. Mix it with a bit of something and it will remain stable and retain its shine. It's the same with other colors. For example, if you need to add a touch of yellow to your work you may find that yellow ocher is the exact color you need. You think you'd be doing the right thing by using it. Not at all. It always turns brown. You need to mix your color so that you obtain the same tone—that is, add white to a browner yellow. In short, the safest way to use color is through mixing. This method can be applied to everything. It's this overall mixing which brings harmony to the painting and keeps the colors from changing.

Another thing to be aware of when using colors is that you should dilute them enough that they spread easily, yet still solidify and cover. If they are too thick you'll have a hard time using the pencil^x and even the brush to spread and combine the shades softly and pleasantly. If they are too liquid, they will produce a thin work that looks scratched. Therefore you have to maintain a balance and refrain from excess with respect to the nature of the objects that you're painting. The human figure, as I have already insinuated, should be painted in full color and should have some consistency. The other parts that make up the composition and which represent particular talents require colors that are a little more flowing. I'm talking about landscapes, architectural elements, plants, flowers and animals. In the underpainting for these parts, you need to thin down your colors in moderation and always do so with the knife. Be careful not to thin them out by adding varnish or drying oil. This will produce a painting that is always sticky and cracks mainly in the shadows when it dries. I'd like to add one more word on this technique and then talk about what I feel is needed to repaint and impasto the work. I



recommend an initial underpainting that is broad and solid enough to support, assist, and sustain the second work.

I've met some very competent masters who, as they worked on their underpaintings, would scumble their canvas with brushes that had hardly any paint on them. They were always drowned in drying oil. This practice has always seemed flawed to me and counter to good practice, since it gives the work a background that is completely lacking in body. This practice is the most important aspect of the underpainting process. It is also flawed because it turns the colors over it yellow. The technique almost always creates another problem. Those who acquire this habit of scumbling when working on their underpainting do the same thing when they are finishing the work. This makes the work lose its freshness right away. It becomes unrecognizable after a couple of years, or even earlier.

From all of this we conclude that for a successful underpainting you need to paint with full color, using it widely and in controlled proportions as close to the nature of the object as you are able to do. In short, a well-done underpainting, with respect to the work you're going to do over it, should be more or less like a kind of half-tone, ready to receive lights and shadows like the blue or gray paper on which we use to draw. This is Mr. de Largillière's idea on the subject. What an advantage it would be not to have to correct those overdone white or black strokes you see in certain careless underpaintings. You can never completely cover them up!

When the underpainting has been completed according to all of these conditions, you have to let it dry completely. Scratch it lightly to remove any hairs that might have come out of the brushes and any bits from the colors that are sometimes poorly mixed when diluted from their dry state. After doing all of this, you need to varnish. Once finished, you can paint over it.

I am well aware that the practice of varnishing the underpainting is not common. I can say, however, that it has its merits as you shall specifically see. When you begin painting over the varnish you'll feel the brush adhere to your canvas and move with ease. You'll see your colors spread easily and cover perfectly. You'll never have the displeasure of seeing them sink into the underpainting. Consequently, you'll never have to redo them by scumbling with either



drying oil, nut oil, or some other kind of oil, or with little glazes whose colors match the part you want to work on. Now these scumbles and glazes have disadvantages that are quite apparent. Ordinary oils, especially drying oil, always turn yellow and weaken the body and firmness of the colors over it. Glazes are merely tormented colors drowned in an oil that always ruins whatever it's mixed with. When you varnish your underpainting you won't have to worry about any of that at all. Everything you do will always appear bright. Still you should be careful to varnish the underpainting as thinly as possible. Nothing will prevent your second work from binding with the first, because oil of turpentine, the base of the varnish, evaporates instantly and leaves behind the resin—exactly what is needed to remove any sponginess from the underpainting. It draws out enough of the oil from the colors over it without eliminating the medium-rich interface at the paint surface. This interface is necessary because it helps to maintain the bond between each of our layers. The overall body of impasto, which gives the painting its beautiful effect, also depends on this bond.

So, my young students who are just beginning to wield a brush, here is how I imagine you should go about creating a principled and tasteful underpainting. I say “imagine” because I have not decided and am far from thinking that the techniques I just proposed are the best you can learn. This is so true that if your teachers were to differ in their opinions I'd advise you to stick with what you see them doing. Even so, with the number of ideas I just presented, I hope they might find a few that are worthy and judge that they may be of some benefit to you. I ask no more than this, for in this alone I will be overly rewarded.

Lets move on to the second part of our process, the one I consider the most significant since, strictly speaking, it builds the painting and gives it all of its solidity. I would like to speak to you about the practice of overpainting.

What I told you before about what you should consider when loading your palette, you doubtless still remember so that I don't have to repeat it here. So, there the palette is, loaded up and you're ready to place your colors. You should proceed, however, only after inspecting your model, whatever kind it is. Once you've done this, you'll be ready to begin working. This attention



to the model will accustom you to correctly judging an object's colors and their varying gradations. This will be infinitely helpful when you put them down on canvas. Your colors will have the same variety that one finds so pleasing in nature—the same variety that the best painters of the Flanders school have so carefully studied. Surely it wasn't out of routine or by haphazardly choosing their colors that they were able to render their subject with the finesse and faithfulness that Mr. de Largillière shows us they have. My teacher used to tell me that all the painters from that school whom he had observed working on color did so with such infinite exactitude that it appeared to be a long-standing characteristic of the school. He was pleased to see the true connection between the colors arranged on their palette and the objects they were busy painting.

He said he also admired the beautiful harmony in the entire gradation of the colors. He saw it as a preview of the harmony that would eventually be in the painting. The best way to establish this harmony between colors is the one I propose here. You need to make them as close to the model's own colors as possible, so that by constantly being forced to compare them (something I talked about earlier) and correctly render the colors that compose them, from the first lights to the last browns, you cannot help but become familiar with the inherent color relationships. Thus, this first small technique, which so many people see as unimportant, will become a source of instruction for those desiring to do it properly. Is it not the same with all our other procedures? Every single one of them depends on some principle. It's only in the search for and deepening of one's understanding of these principles that a man will find the secret to becoming a skilled painter. The common man is like a machine, following only what he has seen others do. He doesn't take the trouble to ask himself about it and find the reason for it. Make sure that from early on you stay clear of this defect and never do anything without asking yourself why it's done that way. Let us continue.

Before starting to paint you have to draw your subject on this vague underpainting and mark out the principal parts as correctly as you can. Ordinarily this happens in studies done from nature. If you had the means and the will to go back to the model and paint from it as well, that



would be a good way to become skilled in color and everything else. Then you'll draw the figure again from the model, correcting your first strokes by adding all the detail necessary based on the demands of the object. In each case you should draw with chalk instead of with a brush and red and yellow lakes as is the common practice. Here is my reason for doing so: the stroke left by a brush leaves a considerable amount of thickness. If it should dry quickly, as it does in summer, the thicknesses will detract from the painting's beauty. I've seen pieces that were done with a great deal of care and attention; these thicknesses however, stood out along the design's contours like a kind of thin cord and became very noticeable when the paintings were placed in daylight. This disadvantage is even more striking in paintings where the drawing was done with a brush on the naked canvas prior to the underpainting. Over time these thicknesses will almost always show through every layer, especially through highlighted parts that are contrasted against light backgrounds.

I give this observation for what it's worth, which is to say, not very much. In any case it's easy to test and come to a decision based on the experiment. You'll easily see how this doesn't pertain to large-scale works. They are above these small details. That's not to say this method of drawing with chalk wouldn't be appropriate for these I think it's suitable for large works as much as it is for smaller ones.

With your well-formulated and corrected drawing complete and your colors made according to the principles I just indicated, you shall begin painting. It's important that you proceed with a well-devised plan. Begin by setting down the overall arrangement and your masses. Without wanting to criticize the different practices of other painters, here is how I think you could go about doing this. Lay down your colors firmly, with a male assurance that will accentuate your work. Start with the browns and use them to draw your object. Don't be afraid to lay down the colors in broad strokes as your work will only become more solid from it. In addition, don't be afraid to make them stronger than they appear in the model. This artifice will produce a vigorous effect that will give back to your work what daylight always takes away. When the work is evenly lit over its entire surface by daylight, the browns are sure to fade by several shades.



People don't pay enough attention to this.

Having laid down your browns while keeping this in mind, you should next put down your light colors starting with the focal point. This sets the tone and gradations of subordinate areas. Lay down the colors purely and exactly where they need to go. Then work on finding the correct and true half-tones that make up the interval between the lights and browns. The whole secret of so-called "beautiful color" resides in this understanding. Yes! This secret is one that cannot be taught. It depends solely on an acute sensitivity, a sensitivity that I would even call "audacious." It enables us to see nature as the great colorists have seen it, but at the same time makes us aspire to seeing it even better than they did. Because, from where did their reputation as great colorists come? It came from the fact that they dared depict nature differently from those who had come before them. They were all the happier for rendering it more truthfully. But how did they find this greater truth? Was it through copying others? No, it was through copying nature with well-trained eyes, perceiving it skillfully with the help of the most esteemed colorists. They did so with their own eyes and in a spirit of emulation, not servitude.

Let me repeat what I just said. I'd like part of your study to consist of consulting the model both for color and for the drawing. Is color less difficult than the drawing? Is color less important for your success? Are there easier ways to learn this to the same degree? Since it isn't possible to provide any measure or rule on coloring, even for copying it, what then could be better than looking for the secret at its veritable source—in nature?

I say "even for copying," and I hope you'll permit me to relate something on this topic that happened to me at Mr. de Largillière's. One day I asked if I could watch him paint a portrait of which I had to make several copies. It wasn't one of the typical portraits that he would rush through sometimes a little too lightly. It was the portrait of a handsome friend. This skilled master was working on it with all the art and taste of which he was capable. I took in every last one of his procedures and was so engrossed with the composition of the head that I learned it by heart. The next day I had to copy it. I asked my teacher to prepare my colors. He showed the same



kindness in granting this request as he had with the first. He was even so kind as to explain the relationship between the colors and the head that was before him. He presented an admirable lesson on how I should use these colors.

Furnished with all of this help I began painting the head with unequalled love. When I was done, I thought that I had infinitely surpassed my usual work. The next day, however, when I examined it next to the original I was completely surprised to see that it was in no way better than my usual work. I saw myself as a hopeless case and was overwhelmed with sadness. Mr. de Largillière showed up and asked, "What's wrong?" "Sir," I told him, "it's hopeless. With all of the help you so graciously gave me, my copy is still wretched. It's such a waste of your generosity. I'll never amount to anything." "Easy now!" he said to me in a fatherly tone. "I was expecting this to happen. I wanted to point out a bias I see in your work. It's perfectly understandable in a young man who is not yet familiar with the principles. I was very pleased that you understood on your own that it's not through the colors that you find the right color. Rather, it's with one's mind and judgment. You were trying to see with my eyes, but each person sees through his own. After I see you paint from nature, I'll tell you what you can expect from yours. But enough with this despondency. I'm happy that you benefitted from my lesson yesterday. Strictly speaking, it was but a practice exercise. As for everything else, you imitated me very well."

Let's get back to our subject and continue.

So you've set down your browns, your lights and your halftones, and linked them together to give your figure the relief and contours it should have. In short, you're ready for the impasto and the overpainting. Among teachers of the old and new schools, this work, just like style, differs. This is true since basically the work determines the style. I know very few masters who show such exposed artifice as Rubens or Van Dyck have shown. That is why I prefer to mention them here. I'm talking about this frank and firm lesson whereby they put their colors in the correct place, combine them as if molding them, but without wearing them out and without altering their purity. They express each shape and each articulation with a loaded brush capable



of creating thick impasto. They go through the entire process following principles as lucid as they are solid. You would do well, young students, to apply yourselves to studying the principles in these great masters' works, either by copying them in this regard, or by studying them often and up close. You should also do the same with respect to other masters who have excelled with the paintbrush. I'm not telling you to adopt Rubens's or Van Dyck's style of painting to the exclusion of all others. But by studying them you'll build a good foundation of experience that will quickly accustom you to putting everything in the right place—your specific preparations, your colors and halftones, as well as your masses. In short, you should work according to a thought-out plan. In doing this you'll gain confidence when working, and this will be a source of happiness in your life. It may be true that any style is good so long as it produces the desired effect. Slowly groping along with a particular style you may eventually reach your goal, but you'll be exposed to the danger of reaching that end more slowly. This will not be the case if you take the clearer path of another style. When all that remains is the particular uncertainty of the "other way of doing things, we've often seen that it becomes a habit among excellent masters. They spend their whole life erasing and repainting. Isn't this enough to make us do things another way?

The work that I just spoke of is particularly relevant to flesh parts. The work required for the overpainting of draperies should be done in the same spirit. They too need to be painted in full color and with firm brushstrokes which, running along in the direction of the folds, must alternately end and begin them. At the same time this brushwork should vary according to the different kinds of fabric that are used in order to represent them accurately and tastefully. It needs to be broader when imitating sheets and velvet, softer with satins, more distinct and looser with fine linen, and so on and so forth. On occasion some rather accomplished masters have been criticized for the uniformity of this part of their paintings. Everything appeared to be dressed in the same fabric. We've had some painters who, without falling into the same trap or imitating these unpleasant errors, were able to convey in their own works a great deal of richness, variety, and, I believe, realism. Without going back any further, I think that Mr. de Troy^{xi},



whom we've just lost. He makes a good example on this point. Regardless of the side you choose in these two kinds of taste, I believe that the work we're talking about here should always be subordinate to the large masses. One should never lose sight of these nor obscure them with small, hard, and troublesome parts that would destroy their economy and create a noticeable flaw in the painting's overall effect. I'll add more to this discussion on drapery work as I discuss retouching. I'll also add a few comments on glazes since in my opinion they belong to this third process. As for the second process, the one we're talking about here, the goal is to approach it with a well-nourished and well thought-out execution so that you won't need anything except for a few highlights or glazes to put it in harmony with the rest of the painting. That is what makes up its essence and that's where I think I should stop.

These are more or less the general principles that I believe we can set for overpainting the main objects of our painting.

Those objects that are of lesser importance and require what we would call special talents depend on different and somewhat varied procedures. Among these are animals, flowers and fruits, landscapes, and buildings and perspectives, otherwise called architecture, among others. I'll review these different techniques here as briefly as possible.

Those concerning animals deal with treating either fur or feathers. Each process needs to be explained separately.

To paint an animal's fur, you should begin with an impasto of undiluted colors, laying down the main shapes first. As you establish these shapes, you should indicate their parts and form as much of the work as possible in layering color upon color. Do only a little at a time though. In this way the color will become stronger; as it thickens little by little, it will acquire a partial resistance to solvents. Then select brushes or paint brushes that are more flexible than the ones you used in the first layer. Take these and with the help of a drop of turpentine oil to make the colors flow more, start working on the details. The fluidity of the color will facilitate the work and give it all the lightness you could ask. At the same time it will protect the work from drying out because you've masterfully mixed it with the underpainting to the extent judged



appropriate. Mixing it with or laying it onto this thick and correct preparation will result in a finish that has a rich, soft finish that no other technique could create at such little expense. This technique has yet another advantage. The work will retain all its brightness because when the turpentine evaporates, it does not affect the colors' purity. Any other process will yellow the colors and will either take away from the stroke's definition or make it look thin and unbearably insipid.

The technique required for painting birds, or, as we say, plumage, is almost the opposite of what I just said. To imitate the beautiful smoothness that nature embellishes on the object, you need a very uniform work from the first layer to the last. At the same time, the work needs to be very precise to give the feathers their thin and slender appearance. One can easily see why turpentine needs to be used. Colors that are too thick will end up making the feathers look heavy and rough. Small glazes are sometimes a great help in rendering a certain transparency and thinness in the see-through areas. But you must only use these glazes with colors that have been extremely well ground, because otherwise they might leave small lumps that would give the work a dull and grainy look. This precaution is the general rule for all glazes and for those in large masses and in transparent colors, which, among other things, I still need to talk about.

The techniques required for painting fur and feathers, which I have just sketched out, require a particular technique that we call *immediate painting*.^{xii} I became familiar with this technique out of a certain necessity. The models I use for my painting, since they are rarely living, are subject to rapid decomposition, especially in summertime. I thus became accustomed to putting them on canvas right away. I think I've found a way of doing this with as much freshness, even with the whites, as if I had done it in successive layers. My promise at the beginning of the lecture to explain this technique forces me to spell out what it consists of.

What I mentioned earlier about the attention you should give to choosing the right colors based on the model should be followed with the utmost care. With your colors made in this way, you should proceed by carefully drawing your object with the shadow colors. You should render the object widely, meaning in masses, and not with a simple stroke. Next you have to



form the light areas of the object in the same way and with the appropriate colors. You should be warned, however, that this first work needs to be very thin, with colors that haven't been diluted. The reason for this is that if you started with a slightly thick impasto before preparing the forms contained in the different masses, these more thickly painted areas would become greasy from the excess oil coming to the surface from underneath, causing colors placed on top to roll off. This would prevent you from being able to work your colors into each other and access all the half-tones through the layers in the process. One can easily understand why this first base is done with undiluted colors. It will provide a background that is solid enough to support the work on top without it giving way as if scratched at the first stroke of the brush or paintbrush. This work should be done slowly by molding and articulating the specific shapes with the correct colors, adding a little to those that you've already started using.

Be careful never to take the paint brush or brush to the canvas without first loading it with a little bit of color at a time in this way and only this way. In working this way, you'll see the work take shape as you progress. It will fill out, take on color, and get closer to being ready for those last finesses—the soft, spiritual touches that represent the soul of good painting and bring the painting to its beautiful conclusion. I refer again to the applications of the rules I mentioned when talking about the techniques for painting feathers and fur. I think they are generally applicable to all the objects that depend on other parts of our art.

I thought I might skip the techniques pertaining to the art of flowers and fruits because of the relationship between them and the processes for animals, and in particular for birds. In effect, almost all these processes are suitable for both. I must add however, that for flowers one generally tends to underpaint, doing so in large areas, lightly and evenly. This will provide a base whose tone will facilitate the purity and crispness of the work you want to do over it. I should also mention that, in addition to color there is another specific kind of work that contributes to the correct degree of brightness, sheen, softness, and matte, as well as the thinness and thickness characterizing each flower. In my opinion, the illustrious Baptiste^{xiii} is a master of this technique and is much more useful to us than all of the very fine and precious



things the Flemish have sent us. In their works, flowers and fruits—everything—is painted the same way with the same touch. The work is as elaborate in the shadows as it is in the lights. All of their flowers and leaves have the same thickness. In Baptiste's work, each object is characterized by brushwork that is specific to it. His roses are thin. His lilies have body. His decisions to make changes are just and appropriate and add value to everything in the painting. How bizarre that such an excellent model would be so poorly known by our youth today given the need for such talent in all the different genres.

We need even more talent in landscape painting. No painter of history can do without it. Is this art practiced more here? I turn red thinking of how uninterested our students are in such a profitable subject. It's such a vast field of instruction for a young man, even in good practice.^{xiv} Only Berchem^{xv} would be able to change our young man's mind. Nature, however, would soon have done the rest. Berchem would teach him to read nature and depict it with that proud facility of his. He would show him how to prepare the sky, how to establish a large uniform work's general mass, and how, with a light hand, one could fill in this form with clouds painted in oil. He would show him how to take advantage of the preparation in this state and bring to it objects that combine with it in such a way that their edges meld, and the area is prevented from drying out. He would point out the free and varied foliage in his trees. In the tree trunks and plants, the terraces and the water, he would point out the perfect, spirited brush stroke that made each of these objects equally real and striking. Just one of this brilliant artist's paintings could serve as a complete course on painting. If a student, one who was a somewhat natural born painter, were to take it all in and begin studying nature, I'm sure he'd be surprised by the degree of skill gained on this topic in such a short time. I would receive a great deal of satisfaction should this assurance be followed with some result.

What is there to say about the talent of painting architecture? This is a skill that is so necessary to the decoration of our paintings and yet so neglected in our school. But the limits of my memory prevent me from going into all of the various processes particular to this talent. There are plenty of great examples for those of our young students who are courageous enough to



rise above our just criticisms concerning the majority of them on this point.

I don't want to try your patience, gentlemen. Would you allow me a few other observations on the last of our main techniques, the one called retouching? You know that I'm committed to doing it and will be as brief as possible.

When the overpainting is complete from end to end, let it dry out completely so that it's ready to be varnished. It must be varnished very thinly with a slightly soft brush over its entire surface to restore colors that might have sunken into the underpainting. This will put it in a state where you'll be able to discern what still needs to be done to give it the harmony it lacks.

This harmony is established by retouching certain parts, either lightening them or darkening them. Most often objects in the foreground, those having the most impact, are retouched with a degree of finesse, strength, or freshness and with glazes reserved for certain draperies and other objects.

There are different ways of retouching. I've seen master painters who were content with retouching only those areas they thought needed it or where they wanted to lighten or darken without reworking the entire area of which these pieces formed a part. This practice has always seemed flawed to me because the edges of these small repairs always show and stick out. Others didn't varnish their paintings but rather rubbed the part that they wanted to retouch with a little drying oil and lightly brushed it with a mist of color. This produced seductive effects through subtle halftones in the manner of Correggio^{xvi}. This practice, however, seemed troublesome because these seductive elements would vanish like a dream, and all of the beautiful work would turn yellow in no time at all.

It's even worse when those same masters would stand in front of their paintings for a month or five weeks, day after day fussing over some small harmony that would keep them returning to the same place as many as five or six times. So, their entire work would quickly take on a lifeless and smoky appearance, caused by all that drying oil. When drying, the oil would absorb all the glaze that had been put over it and cause the worst effects imaginable.

Several other masters have a very different technique which, in my opinion, doesn't fulfill



the purpose of retouching. It's the practice of repainting the main parts of the painting with an almost-fully-loaded brush. This is basically nothing more than an additional impasto, ill suited to certain finesses, harmonies, and brush strokes that are required in certain spots. The work is hard to achieve once you've let yourself get caught up in the color. This kind of retouching is just one more way that will keep you reworking your painting endlessly without it ever appearing more refined or finished. What then do I think is the method with the most merit? Without wanting to criticize those used by my colleagues, I think it's the technique I started to propose—varnishing the painting from end to end. In doing this you'll be able to clearly see what needs to be done in terms of harmony and specific light brushwork. In short, you'll be able to determine what specific refinements and any other conditions are needed.

The work required to carry out all of these refinements is done easily over this coat of varnish. There is no need to worry that the varnish will interfere with the intimate bonding of the colors from the retouching with those from the freshly painted impasto layer. These two layers are done in such quick succession that the bonding will occur and will hold forever, unlike with older paintings where the retouching tends to detach even without the layer of varnish.

To retouch, make a succession of exact and pure colors. Our tendency is to not make these based on the model. It seems, nevertheless, that we need to do so here more than with the preceding processes, especially with flesh parts.

Your use of color would certainly benefit if you were to accustom yourself to looking for colors at their true source. Your work would most definitely be influenced by this particular study of color should you choose to apply yourself to it. Since retouching is just a light addition to the solid execution that serves as its base, it shouldn't require a very long session with the model. This will provide realistic refinements that would be impossible to gauge without the model. I live with the hope of eventually seeing some of our students who are natural-born colorists take this point to heart. I'm sure that they will feel so happy with it that they'll always be grateful to me for having shown it to them.

Since retouching is only meant as a light addition to the overall body of the painting, it



should be done with only a little color. The color should be used very simply and spread over the entire section you're working on. This precept is particularly important for flesh parts and other objects composed of light and luminous shapes, especially whites. The precept is slightly arbitrary for draperies and other accessories. Usually these only need a highlight or a vigorous stroke of the brush that can sometimes be added dry and sometimes with a little glaze.

One should be very circumspect in the use of these small glazes, especially in the painting's light parts. This is because the glazes predictably add a heavy, ashen appearance when added to thick colors. Inevitably they turn yellow because, as I already noted, drying oil is always added to them. It's not the same with glazes done with red lake, ultramarine, yellow lake, or other transparent colors. These are used either to increase the brightness or tone of certain draperies or to render the vivacity of certain plumage and types of flowers more accurately. The use of glaze for this for this effect, and its durability, is more dependable. When using glaze in this way you still need to take a few precautions and have a certain understanding of it that I feel would be appropriate to teach to our beginners.

One should always glaze thinly so you don't exaggerate the needed tone. Hold off on glazing a second time until the first glaze is completely dry. This will also make it easy to bring back the lights in the fabric and give them more brilliance in the second glaze. It is particularly well suited to velvets and other fabrics. By putting only a moderate amount of color on the brush, your glaze will be more even, and it will be easier to increase or decrease its effect depending on the areas. They should be applied very sparingly in the shadowed areas. If not, these areas will become too ardent or too hard and would stop turning and detract from the brightness of the light areas. In these areas it would suffice to dull it using a brush with almost no color.

Even though I consider these full glazes among the operations used to finish the work, I must warn you, however, that they never take to an old preparation as well as they do to a new one that is dry enough to be varnished. The underlying layer that exists in a recently painted work is better suited to bonding with the retouching and to giving it the work an unalterable solidity.



It would be superfluous for me to say that most of this solidity also depends on the correct choice of colors used to make these glazes. We pay very little attention to this choice, however. It seems to depend on several factors that are only indirectly related to the subjects I'm talking about here. I could make this the topic of another lecture should you deem it of some use, gentlemen. As for this lecture, I ask to forgive its length, repetition and useless parts. I'm flattered that you consider it a sign of my zeal for a subject that touches you—the education of our youth—and a sign of my respect for the great examples you continue to provide on this topic.



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ⁱ Oudry, Jean-Baptiste. 1844. “Réflexions sur la manière d’étudier la couleur en comparant les objets les uns avec les autres.”, Delivered on June 7, 1749. In *Le Cabinet de l’Amateur et de l’Antiquaire* 3:33–52

ⁱⁱ Nicolas de Largillière (b. Paris, 1656; d. Paris, 1746).

ⁱⁱⁱ Oudry’s *ocre de ru*, which he distinguishes from ordinary yellow ochre, may be understood as a brown-red or brown-yellow iron oxide earth pigment. Definitions are given in Pernety, *Dictionnaire portatif de peinture, sculpture et gravure*, 428; Eastaugh et al, *Pigment Compendium*, 280; Perego, *Dictionnaire de matériaux du peintre*, 505. A variety of synonyms may be encountered in both French and English (e.g., *ochre de rut*, *oker de rouse*, etc.).

^{iv} Exactly what was understood in the eighteenth century by the term *la mine* is rather uncertain. In modern usage, *la mine* is usually understood as *graphite*, as in *mine de plomb* and *mine de crayon*. However, *mine* occurs also in the name of other pigments, primarily *mine rouge* and *mine orange*, both of which are names for red lead (minium, lead tetroxide), and some types of yellow iron oxide earth, as in *mine de fer figurée* and *mine de fer limoneuse*. Given the context in which Oudry uses the term, either of the last two interpretations might be more probable than graphite. (Perego, *Dictionnaire de matériaux du peintre*, 244, 456, and 476).



^v. There is a degree of ambiguity in Oudry's phrase, "*vous en avez fait une esquisse ou une pensée en masse de clair obscur*," in particular, whether he means a sketch on the primed canvas or a separate preliminary sketch on paper. His usage of *clair obscur* implies chiaroscuro. In his 1749 lecture *Reflexions* he defines *clair-obscur* as "the art of distributing the light and dark in such a way as to give the painting its effect."

^{vi}. At its most specific, Oudry's term, *la laque* would refer to an organic lake pigment made from an insect-derived dye precipitated onto an inorganic substrate, such as alumina, but here it may more broadly include other red lake pigments.

^{vii}. Oudry's *stil de grain* is the French term for a range of yellow and yellow-brown lake pigments made using dyestuffs from plants, such as buckthorn (*Rhamnus* spp., French or Persian berries), weld, and quercitron. The term probably covers a variety of shades of yellow and equates with the English term *pink*, as in brown pink, Dutch pink, among others, and with the Dutch term *schitgeel*' (*Dictionnaire des matériaux du peintre*, 451).

^{viii}. Oudry makes repeated mentions of the term *huile grasse*, ' which is to be understood as *drying oil*; that is, an oil such as linseed made strongly drying by heating with a lead compound such as litharge (lead monoxide) (Massing, 1998). A source from the same period, equates *huile grasse* with *huile siccativ*e and, like Oudry, recommends its use for blacks, red (lac) lake, and other colors that lack body and dry slowly. (*Dictionnaire portative de peinture, sculpture et gravure*, 362).

^{ix}. Oudry's use of the plural noun *les orpins* is interesting. It implies more than one shade of arsenic sulfide and almost certainly means both the yellow pigment, *orpiment*, and the orange-red form, later known as *realgar*. By the early eighteenth century both natural and synthetic forms of these minerals were in use. Pernetty describes both yellow and red types in his *Dictionnaire* entry for *orpiment*; [436-437]the latter is called *orpin rouge*, with *sandaraque des Grecs*' and *réagal* given as synonyms.

^x Oudry's term *pinceau* is translated here as *pencil*, but in the sense of its archaic English meaning "fine artist's paintbrush suited to delicate work." This definition provides an appropriate distinction between Oudry's *pinceau* and *brosse*, the latter term implying a broader, coarser brush.

^{xi}. Jean-François de Troy (bapt. Paris 1679; d. Rome, 1752).

^{xii} Oudry's term *peindre au premier coup* equates with the Italian term *alla prima*, meaning a method of painting in which the desired effect is created in a single application of paint.

^{xiii} Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer (b. 1636 Lille; d. 1699 London).

^{xiv} The precise meaning of the latter clause of this sentence is obscure even in the original French: «*Quel vaste champ pour former un jeune homme, même dans la bonne pratique!*»

^{xv}. Nicolaes Berchem (b. 1620 Haarlem; d. 1683 Amsterdam).

^{xvi} Antonio Allegri da Correggio (b. 1489 Correggio – d. [1534](#) Correggio)

